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ABSTRACT

This study investigated two questions: (1) Can a humorous persuasive message increase the amount of persuasion compared with a serious control message? (2) Can humor external to and contiguous with a persuasive message increase its persuasiveness? The research on the first question attempted to determine intervening variables responsible for prior failure to find effects of humor on persuasion. The initial opinions and verbal ability of the subjects were factors expected to interact significantly with the humor factor. Though the results did not support the verbal ability factor, subjects were found to react more favorably to humorous than to serious appeals. The research addressing the second question analyzed the message context--humorous or serious--in relation to subjects' moods. The results did indicate a positive correlation between the humorous context and happier subject mood, but did not reveal any difference in persuasive effect. The author concludes that humor's effects on persuasion may occur through mediating processes not investigated in this study and suggests further investigation of humor's effects on source credibility and attention. (LG)

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CAN HUMOR INCREASE PERSUASION, OR IS IT ALL A JOKE?*

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Politicians and advertisers, individuals professionally concerned with persuading others, often use humor to facilitate the process. The humor used by Abraham Lincoln and the Kennedy brothers has been suggested as being a factor contributing to their political success. Markiewicz[1] found that approximately 42 per cent of television commercials use some humor. However, a review of studies comparing humorous and serious persuasive messages by Gruner[2], Kennedy[3], Kilpela[4], Lull[5], McGown[6], Pokorny & Gruner[7], and Youngman[8] indicated that humor was not found to increase persuasion. These results implied that efforts to include humor in persuasive messages might be fruitless. Is the joke on the "funny" persuaders, or can humor increase persuasion?

The present research investigated two general issues within this context: 1.) Can a humorous persuasive message increase the amount of persuasion compared with a serious control message? 2.) Can humor external to and contiguous with a persuasive message increase its persuasiveness?

The research addressing the first question attempted to find moderator variables responsible for the prior failure to find effects of humor on persuasion. Thus two factors expected to interact significantly with the humor factor, initial opinions of Ss, and verbal ability of Ss, were incorporated into factorial designs. The method used is similar to that used by previous investigators studying humor's effect on persuasion (e.g., Gruner, 1972; Kennedy, 1972). That is, the persuasive impact of humorous and serious messages similar in arguments contained and in length was compared. Thus, the effect of the humor per se could be determined without confounding it with the effects of arguments in the message and length of communication.

With this method, any observed differences between the messages might be mediated by variations in comprehension, moods of audience members, and perceptions of source ethos.

The research addressing the second question used serious messages only, while varying the context in which these messages were heard. Thus, some message recipients heard messages within a humorous context, while others heard the same messages within a serious context. These variations in context were expected to affect audience members' moods. The context in which the persuasive messages were embedded was irrelevant to the messages. Since the background was not attributed to the source of the persuasive messages, variations in perceptions of speaker ethos should not have occurred. Also, since the messages were the same while only the context varied, comprehension was expected to be similar for humorous versus serious context conditions. Consequently, this second line of research allowed for simpler interpretations of why observed differences occurred, and hence, for more clear cut inferences as to the role of humor in persuasion.

Humorous Compared With Serious Messages.

EXPERIMENT I: Honors versus average English Students' Responses to Humorous Versus Serious Persuasive Messages.

Subjects (Ss) high in intelligence have been found to appreciate humor more than those lower in intelligence.[9] If humorous message recipients failed to appreciate the humor contained, they would not be expected to be more persuaded by a humorous compared with a serious speech. Thus, verbal ability of Ss was expected to significantly interact with message appeal, such that humorous messages would be more persuasive for Ss high than those

low in verbal ability.

Method

Subjects. Seventh grade students in two English classes at Eastmoor Junior High School in Columbus, Ohio served as Ss. One of the classes was an honors group (n = 31), and the other class was an average group (n = 24)

Procedure. A 2 x 2 factorial design was used, with message appeal (humorous vs. serious) and verbal ability (honors vs. average English class) as factors.

Students were told that the experimenter was a librarian who wished them to read an essay and to answer some questions about it. Half of each class received the humorous essay, while the other half received the serious essay. A variety of types of humor was used in the humorous essay, including primarily plays on words and incongruity humor. The thesis of the essays was that school should be held during the summer.

After the essays had been read they were collected and the questionnaires containing the dependent measures were distributed. Two self-rating items measured students' attitudes, and two 5-point semantic differential-type scales measured funniness and interestingness of the essay. A recall test was given, with students asked to list as many reasons as they remembered that the author had given for his belief. Finally, students were asked, "list any ideas or thoughts you had about what the author said, when you were reading the essay." Seven minutes each were allowed for the recall and for the ideas sections.

Results

The check on the humor manipulation showed that the humorous essay was rated as significantly funnier than the serious essay at the $p < .001$ level (F = 19.42, df = 1/51).

No significant interaction effect nor main effect was observed on the self-rating attitude items. Three judges rated the thoughts Ss had listed, placing them in one of three categories: (a) agreeing with the message (b) disagreeing (c) neutral. Analyses of variance on the averages of the judges' ratings were performed for each category.

No significant interaction effect was found on this index of attitudes. However, those reading the humorous essay wrote significantly more agreeing thoughts ($F = 4.58$, $df = 1/51$, $p < .04$), fewer disagreeing thoughts ($F = 3.56$, $df = 1/51$, $p < .06$), and about an equal number of neutral thoughts ($F = 1.9$), compared with serious essay readers. (Interjudge reliabilities for each category were .76 for agreeing thoughts, .83 for disagreeing thoughts, and only .15 for neutral thoughts).

The humorous essay was rated as more interesting than the serious one ($F = 4.30$, $df = 1/51$, $p < .04$). Honors students performed significantly better on the recall measure than average students ($F = 14.67$, $df = 1/51$, $p < .001$). No significant interaction or message effect was found on the recall measure.

Discussion

The results suggest that verbal ability of Ss is not an important factor in determining responses to humorous messages. One possible reason for this failure is that the verbal ability of Ss in the two classes may not have differed greatly enough to obtain the effect. The results of the listed thoughts index suggest that seventh graders react more favorably to humorous than to serious appeals.

EXPERIMENT II: Effects of initial opinion on responses to humorous versus serious films.

Two groups of studies suggest that initial opinions of Ss might be important in determining when humorous versus serious messages are more persuasive. The first group deals with the effects of distraction on persuasion.[10] These studies suggest that distractions reduce the counter-argumentation of Ss and therefore increase persuasion. Subjects who are opposed to the message position would be expected to counterargue more than those who are neutral or in favor. Thus, distractions would be most effective with those initially opposed to the message. If humor functions as a distractor, Ss initially opposed to the message position would be more persuaded by a humorous than a serious message. Those initially neutral or in favor of the position would be approximately equally persuaded by either a humorous or serious message.

The second group of studies found that people tend to laugh more at those with whom they do not sympathize or identify than at members of their own reference group. That is, Ss' own attitudes towards the target of the joke influenced their perceptions of the humorousness of the joke. When the humor incorporated into a message directly supports the message position, those who are initially opposed to that position might not be amused by the humor, and might react against the persuasive attempt as a whole. This suggests that those initially opposed to a position should be less persuaded by a humorous than a serious message. Those initially neutral or in favor of a position should respond more positively to a humorous than to a serious message advocating that position. These predictions are opposite of those derived from the distraction analysis.

Method

Subjects. Students in two Business Administration courses at Ohio

State University (n = 36) participated in the experiment as part of a course requirement.

Pretest of Attitudes. Initial opinions were measured as part of a larger questionnaire administered by the instructor of the class. Three self-rating scales on the topic were surrounded by five filler items.

Design. A 2 x 2 factorial design with message (humorous vs. serious film) and initial opinion (in favor or neutral vs. opposed) was used. Four Ss indicated being neutral and these were included with those in favor for the 2 x 2 analysis.

Procedure. The experiment was run two days after the pretest for one class, and five days after for the other class. Subjects were matched on the basis of their initial opinion responses and randomly assigned to conditions. Groups of approximately ten Ss each were run at one time.

Subjects were told that their help was needed to evaluate some films. They were shown either a humorous or a serious film on safety belts. The films were similar in length (60 seconds), in sound, and in color. Each film contained the same (only one main) argument. They then completed two 7-point Likert-type attitude measures on safetybelt usage and a behavioroid measure asking "How much money would you willingly donate to research concerning safetybelts?" Subjects also responded to four 7-point semantic differential-type questions concerning how trustworthy the source of the film was, how funny and interesting the film was, and how important the producers of the film consider the issue.

Results

The humorous film was rated as funnier than the serious film ($F = 9.81$, $df = 1/32$, $p < .004$) . On the behavioroid measure, Ss did not all respond with a specific amount of money. Therefore, responses were weighted as 0,

if they had indicated they would give nothing, and 1 if they had indicated they would give something.

The three attitude measures did not correlate highly with each other, and were therefore not combined into a total score for each S. Instead, a multivariate analysis of variance was performed on the three attitude dependent measures. The interaction of message and initial opinion factors was found to be significant ($F = 2.95$, $df = 3/30$, $p < .05$). This was mainly due to responses to the second Likert-type scale which indicated that there was more persuasion for those initially in favor (or neutral) due to the serious film, but more persuasion after the humorous film for those initially opposed ($F = 3.73$, $df = 1/32$, $p < .06$). The other two attitude items did not yield significance ($F = .08$, $F = 2.59$, $df = 1/32$) for this interaction. The main effect for initial opinion was significant in the expected direction ($F = 13.73$, $df = 3/30$, $p < .001$). The multivariate F for the message appeal effect was not significant ($F = .30$, $df = 3/30$). Table 1 shows the mean attitude scores.

Insert Table 1 about here

The source of the humorous film was rated as more trustworthy ($F = 4.37$, $df = 1/32$, $p < .04$) than the serious source. The humorous film was also rated as more interesting than the serious film ($F = 10.97$, $df = 1/32$, $p < .002$). No other effects were significant.

Discussion

The distraction interpretation of humor was in agreement with the significant interaction found on the attitude measures. However, a more adequate test of this interpretation must include a measure of Ss' counter-argumentation.

One problem common to both the first and second experiment is the difficulty in generating humorous and serious messages equivalent on all other dimensions. Humor integral to a persuasive message might affect the interpretation of the arguments contained therein. Furthermore, the humor effect might be mediated by variations in comprehension of the message, perceptions of the source, or moods of audience members.

Effects of Humorous Versus Serious Context on Responses to Persuasive Messages

EXPERIMENT III: Context Variations - Humorous versus Serious

A series of three studies, considered the attitudinal effects of variations of the context in which persuasive messages were presented. The hypothesis tested was that the context would affect Ss' moods, and so in turn their responses to the persuasive message. That is, Ss put in a "happy" mood by listening to humorous anecdotes would be less likely to resist being persuaded, and less motivated to produce cognitive responses in opposition to the persuasive message. A situation analogous to this procedure would be the embedding of advertisements (persuasive messages) in a comedy program versus a serious drama.

Method.

The method used for the three studies was similar with minor variations. Therefore, the method and the results of all three studies will be considered together.

Procedure. A total of 169 Ss participated in these studies. Humorous context and Serious context formed the conditions in the experiment. Five short persuasive messages were incorporated into one of two contexts -- a humorous one or a serious one. Tape-recorded sketches by Bill Cosby were

used for the humorous context. Recorded speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr. were used for the serious context.

The purpose of the experiment was allegedly to choose which messages were most effective. Three to six minute segments of background context were alternated with the persuasive messages, until all five messages were presented. In the first study only, Ss rated the humor segments for funniness and their moods for happiness on 10-point semantic differential type scales. After each of the five persuasive messages, Ss heard an opinion statement read twice and then indicated their agreement with it on a 15-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = "definitely disagree" to 15 = "definitely agree." Finally, after the recording was heard, Ss completed five 10-point semantic differential-type scales on how interesting the composite of messages were; and how likeable, trustworthy, and well-informed the speaker of the messages was.

Results

Subjects in the Humorous Context condition rated the context as significantly funnier ($F = 244.70$, $df = 1/30$, $p < .001$), and themselves as significantly happier ($F = 15.84$, $df = 1/30$, $p < .001$) compared with those in the Serious Context condition. Total scores for each S on the attitude ratings were formed by averaging the ratings made after each of the five messages. Analysis of variance (2 x 3, context by replication) were performed on the total opinion measures of attitude, and on ratings of interest of the messages, likeableness, trustworthiness, and informedness of the source.

No significant effects for the context factor were found on any of these dependent measures. Failure to detect a significant difference in attitude comparing humorous and serious conditions should not be attributed to the

weakness of the statistical test used. The standard deviation for the mean difference on the opinion scores was .317 allowing a difference of .625 on the 15-point scale to have been detected as significant ($p < .05$). Therefore, one may conclude that any effects due to using humorous vs. serious contexts are at most very small.

Discussion.

In this experiment, any effects of the humorous context on persuasion were expected to be mediated by changing Ss' moods. The check on the humor's effect on moods indicated that Ss in the Humorous Context condition did rate themselves as happier than did those in the Serious Context condition. However, this difference in Ss' moods did not affect their persuasability.

Implications for future research

Failure to find humor's effects on mood to in turn affect attitude change suggests that humor may have its effects on persuasion through other mediating processes. Thus, humor's effects on perceptions of the source might be necessary for humorous messages to be more effective than serious ones. In the first experiment readers of the humorous message indicated that they would like to have other articles by the same author more than did serious message readers. In the second experiment, the humorous source was rated as more trustworthy than the serious one. If humor enhances source image, the effect of humor would be most likely to be evident with low credibility or disliked sources. Thus these source characteristics might be varied systematically in factorial designs.

In all of the research reviewed, Ss were captive audiences required to attend to the messages as part of the task. This is likely to have yielded audiences considerably more attentive than those one might find in natural settings. If humor increases attention to a message, this increase in

attention would not have been detectable in previous research due to the ceiling effect of already high attention. Thus, research in which attention is allowed to vary might demonstrate humor's potential effect on attention as an important mediator of persuasion.

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Table 1

Mean Attitude Scores on Two Likert-Type Items and Behavioroid

Measure: Safety Belt Issue, Experiment II

Message	Initial Opinion					
	Favorable or Neutral			Opposed		
	Likert 1	Likert 2	Behav.	Likert 1	Likert 2	Behav.
Humorous	2.66[a]	4.00[a]	.77[b]	4.28	5.57	.14
n	9	9	9	7	7	7
Serious	2.33	3.11	.66	4.18	6.36	.54
n	9	9	9	11	11	11

[a]Lower numbers indicate more persuasion on a 7-point scale.
[b]Higher numbers indicate more persuasion on a scale ranging from 0 to 1.